2017

At the First Table

Jodi Campbell

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Early Modern
Cultural Studies

SERIES EDITORS

Carole Levin
Marguerite A. Tassi

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Food and Social Identity in Early Modern Spain

JODI CAMPBELL

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS
LINCOLN AND LONDON

Manufactured in the United States of America

Publication of this volume was assisted by
the Virginia Faulkner Fund, established
in memory of Virginia Faulkner, editor in
chief of the University of Nebraska Press.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Campbell, Jodi, 1968– author.
Title: At the first table: food and social identity
in early modern Spain / Jodi Campbell.
Description: Lincoln: University of Nebraska
Press, 2017. | Series: Early modern cultural studies
| Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2016010863 (print)
LCCN 2016033152 (ebook)
ISBN 9780803290815 (paperback: alk. paper)
ISBN 9780803296596 (epub)
ISBN 9780803296602 (mobi)
ISBN 9780803296619 (pdf)
Subjects: LCSH: Food habits—Social aspects—
Spain—History—16th century. | Food habits—Social
aspects—Spain—History—17th century. |
Gastronomy—Spain—History—16th century. |
Gastronomy—Spain—History—17th century. |
Food—Symbolic aspects—Spain. | Spain—Social
life and customs—16th century. | Spain—Social life
and customs—17th century. | BISAC: HISTORY /
Europe / Spain & Portugal. | SOCIAL SCIENCE
/ Sociology / General. | COOKING / History.
Classification: LCC GT2853.S7 C36 2017 (print) | LCC
GT2853.S7 (ebook) | DDC 394.1/2094609031—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2016010863

Set in Garamond Premier by John Klopping.
Designed by N. Putens.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THEY SAY THAT TOO MANY COOKS SPOIL THE BROTH, BUT in this case quite the opposite is true. This project was greatly improved by the many hands that have helped season and stir it over the years. Texas Christian University granted me a semester sabbatical in 2010, which allowed me to dedicate substantial research time to the Spanish archives. I would like to thank my colleagues in TCU's Department of History and Geography for awarding me the Pate Professorship in 2013–14, which provided time, financial support, and encouragement. Additional and much-appreciated funding was provided by TCU's Research and Creative Activities Fund and the Program for Cultural Cooperation between Spain's Ministry of Culture and United States Universities. Graduate assistants Amanda Milian, Scarlet Jernigan, and Chad McCutchen helped with the early stages of research and sifting through sources. Ken Albala, Ray Ball, Amanda Milian, and Kathleen Kennedy contributed thoughtful and constructive feedback on several chapters. Rachel Shaw gave invaluable advice on how to help the whole thing come together, as did the readers for UNP. Input from Patty Scarborough and Michael Campbell was heartening and helpful. This book is much the better for the contributions of all the people named here; any remaining errors,

gaps, or misunderstandings are entirely my own. I am grateful to Kathy McDorman and Becca Sharpless for their friendship, encouragement, and the occasional kick in the pants; to Pablo Gómez for the rivalry; to Alisa Plant for her patience and unflagging support of this project from the very first time we discussed it over lunch several years ago; and to Juan Carlos for everything.

AT THE FIRST TABLE

Introduction

ANTONIO MORENO DE LA TORRE WAS A SEVENTEENTH-century merchant in Zamora, a city in northwestern Spain. Like many businessmen of his time and place, Moreno kept a diary for several years in which he recorded his business ventures, travels, social activities, and key events in the lives of his family and friends. The entries are brief and direct, without much detail or personal reflection. Nevertheless, as he wrote about these events, his descriptions indicate the extent to which an awareness of food and its symbolic importance was woven into the social, festive, and business activities of early modern Spaniards.

Moreno's observations on his social and business contacts nearly always included meals as an important element, celebrating religious or other festive events and demonstrating valuable social connections. On the feast day of San Atilano in May 1675, his entry read, "Sermon from the famous Franciscan, and then a fulsome meal, especially at the first table, with the dean, the priests, the aldermen and myself." In the spring of 1676, after the Palm Sunday procession, he noted that "Valmaseda gave a dinner in the house of Don Francisco Valderas, which I attended, very successful."[1] Moreno's entries most often referred to the context of the meals he attended (a festival day, family celebration, or meeting of business

partners) and the other people who attended, but occasionally the quality or quantity of the food itself was impressive enough to earn commentary. He described the Corpus Christi festival of 1675 as "audacious in everything. . . . There were fountains of wine, *aloja* and flavored waters for all, and the chapter went to great expense in providing food and drink, which must have cost eight thousand *reales*."[2] He noted approvingly that the baptism of his nephew's son "was carried out with great ostentation, as there was a fine spread of good food" and registered a festival celebrating the founding of the local church for which "the government prepared a grand dinner."[3]

Moreno's commentaries illustrate the ways in which food registered in the quotidian imagination and experience of ordinary Spaniards as part of a series of displays of status, power, wealth, identity, religion, and social connection. For upwardly mobile merchants like Moreno, the dinners he attended were markers of social ascent. His inclusion at the "first table" for the San Atilano feast was a public sign of his acceptance among the town's most important personages.[4] Just as often, however, food was used to define and maintain social boundaries between different groups and social levels: rich and poor, urban and rural, Christians and non-Christians. In either case, food was an integral part of people's social, cultural, and religious lives and an important element of the performance of individual and group identity.

Early modern Europe was a society of orders, in which everyone had a clearly cast social role that was determined by factors such as age, gender, religion, social position, occupation, and region. These factors in turn generated a set of expectations about one's appearance, behavior, and interactions with others. Such expectations may be unfamiliar to modern readers, especially in a context where we emphasize at least the rhetoric and appearance of equality. In the twentieth-century United States, civil rights protests argued that individuals had the legal and social right to be treated equally and to pursue their individual preferences in the marketplace regardless of their race or status. It is telling that one of the most powerful and symbolic forms of these protests happened at lunch counters, an important intersection of social space and the provision of food, where

students demanded an end to racial segregation. In premodern Europe, though, such a goal would have been unthinkable. This was a society for which inequality was the norm, and this inequality needed to be visible and maintained in daily practice. These requirements generated a kind of choreography of everyday life that is rather more complicated than what we are accustomed to today. It was also important for this choreography to be publicly displayed—for Antonio Moreno to be seated "at the first table" with the priests and aldermen, for example, or for the city government's support of the church to be displayed in the form of a "grand dinner."

Therefore in this book I interpret the intersection of food and social relationships as a form of performance, through which early modern Spaniards established and communicated their individual and collective identities. The acquisition, preparation, and consumption of foodstuffs are rich with symbolism related to the places and people involved. Many food-related words draw on the Latin root *edere*, from which we get *eat* and *edible*. Adding the prefix *com-* gives us *comestible* in English, French, and Spanish, emphasizing the companionable and community aspect of eating; the literal meaning of the word *companion* means "one with whom you eat bread." We tend to think of food first in terms of nutrition, but in the words of anthropologist Jesús Contreras, food functioned "as sustenance, pleasure, medicine, poison, a means to honor or offend God, as much as a form of maintaining health."[5] At the most intimate level, home is symbolized by the preparation of food. In medieval France the kitchen was known as the "house within a house," while *hogar*, the Spanish word for home, is the same as the word for hearth, the center of both cooking and sociability.[6] The ways in which people choose food, share it with others, and the forms, places, and occasions in which they consume it, are all part of displaying who they are, what their connections are, and where they fit in.

Mary Douglas has argued for understanding the cultural function of food as a kind of grammar, in which its meaning is constructed via the elements of chronological location (time of day, season, place in the festival cycle, relationship to important life events, or some combination thereof), ingredients (meat, fish, or vegetables; sweet or savory flavors), and the

location where it is consumed (in a home, restaurant, outdoors, or on the street).[7] If we add to these elements the dimension of the categorized nature of early modern European society, food becomes an ideal way to perceive and understand social relationships. This is not an ahistorical perception imposed by scholars; Spaniards themselves understood their relationships with food in terms of social categorization and connection. Sources from medical treatises to conduct books all agreed that different kinds of foods were appropriate to different kinds of people and occasions. Some foods were best suited to monks, others to sailors, students, prisoners, or royalty; some were considered appropriate according to a person's gender or age. There were foods suitable for events such as weddings, funerals, or the cycles of the liturgical calendar—fish days, meat days, fasting for Lent, feasting for Carnival and other religious holidays. Meals were an important component of the establishment of groups and relationships: each year the peasants who worked on land owned by someone else would display their loyalty and service by sharing a communal meal with their landlord. City councils celebrated the signing of important contracts with a meal; social and religious organizations such as guilds and confraternities celebrated their founder's day or patron saint day with a banquet for their members. The thirteenth-century jurist Albert of Ghent argued that it was impossible for one person to accuse another of a crime or try to bring him to trial if the first person had shared food or drink with the second after the alleged crime had occurred, because the sharing of food implied a bond of mutual support and reconciliation.[8]

Studying the role of food as a mechanism in these relationships provides us with not only a more nuanced picture of early modern Spanish society but also a better lens through which to view changes in social structure over time. The early modern period in Europe was fundamentally a period of transition—indeed, it was invented (in the sense of being identified by scholars as a historical period) as a way to acknowledge its characteristics of instability and change. Traditional periodization of European history considered the period following the fifth-century fall of Rome to be "medieval" and the Renaissance to be the beginning of "modern." However, since historians increasingly came to appreciate the long transition and

connection between the two—as well as the difficulty of lumping together such disparate worlds as those of Chaucer and Churchill in the "modern" era—it became more useful to label the period between the Black Death in the fourteenth century and the French and Industrial Revolutions at the turn of the nineteenth as a separate one, "early modern." This allows us to acknowledge its significance as a period of complexity and transition, including changes in labor relationships and the increasing economic and political role of the third estate following the Black Death; the growth of urban populations; the rise of the printing press and corresponding developments in education, religion, and communication; the development of the modern state and the personality cult of monarchs; dramatic growth in trade, exploration, and the growth of European colonial empires; and the Reformation and the changing position of the church vis-à-vis the state across Europe. By the eighteenth century, western Europeans were more connected to each other by trade, print culture, and infrastructure than they had ever been, while at the same time they began to develop distinct national identities and cultures.

Such changes were expressed through and reflected in Europeans' production and consumption of food. By around the year 1000, a broadly common European food culture had developed, based on the fusion of classical Roman and medieval Germanic foodways. These common foodways were not perfectly uniform or unchanging, but they rested on the central assumption that meals were centered on bread accompanied by meat and other items, what the Romans knew as *companatico*, "the idea that bread is the basis of the meal that everything else *goes with*."[9] There were also geographical variations, as one would expect, based on the availability and ease of cultivation of different foodstuffs. Medieval food historians suggest that social and class variations were relatively insignificant. Elites and masses ate mainly the same foods, and the principal difference in their consumption of food was in the quantity of what they ate, rather than kind. In the High Middle Ages (the eleventh through thirteenth centuries), however, a series of factors led to greater social differentiation within that common culture, one that was reflected in changing foodways. Demographic growth, the expansion of cultivated

lands, and increased consumption of grain led to the increased importance of land ownership, and therefore to greater control over land and grain, as well as uncultivated areas, by wealthy elites. With the expansion of grain cultivation and the corresponding loss of pasture and hunting land, access to meat became more limited, and its consumption became a symbol of social prestige. Agrarian expansion also meant that a greater variety of food was exchanged via trade, so that those with money had access to much more culinary variety, especially in urban areas, rather than depending entirely on what was produced locally. By the sixteenth century, these changes led to an important turning point in European food culture in terms of the growing differentiation between the lifestyles and foodways of people at different economic and social levels. This differentiation was expressed through tactics such as the acquisition of unusual or expensive foods, a new emphasis on table manners, and changing approaches toward charity and hospitality.

The symbolic value of food in early modern society is underscored by the wide range of sources in which Spaniards recorded information about food and its role in social relationships. The most direct, of course, are those recording the purchase of food and its uses. Such purchases are noted in the household accounts of elite families, which contain lists of food typically purchased and served for ordinary days when the family dined at home, as well as more elaborate menus for when the family entertained guests. The account books of universities include lists of rations provided for their residential students, including the purchase of food of higher quality for rectors and other officials, and the stipulation that poorer scholarship students were to receive the leftovers from the tables of the wealthier students. The constitutions of *cofradías* (lay religious brotherhoods) and monasteries often dedicated several chapters to the organization of meals, ranging from special banquets for festival days to the daily meals they provided to the poor. Municipal regulations governed the storage, sale, and prices of various kinds of essential foodstuffs, as well as the kinds of foods that could be provided by different kinds of urban establishments. Dietary and medical treatises described the qualities of different foods and made recommendations about those

that were appropriate to different categories of people according to their age, status, gender, and physical condition.

Other, less literal sources suggest the social and cultural symbolism of food. Food had a prominent place in Golden Age literature, used sometimes to evoke a particular context and more often to illustrate a character's status or relationships. Lope de Vega's play *La dama boba* begins with a scene that associates sweet foods with the refinement, femininity, and elegance of the court lady, and different kinds of foods in the same author's *Fuenteovejuna* highlight the difference between city and country culture.[10] Religious conformity was judged by the things people ate: no one was allowed to share his table with a person who had been excommunicated, and Inquisition records suggest that people were most likely to denounce their neighbors for heresy or crypto-Judaism because of their food practices (not cooking with pork fat, not following Lenten dietary restrictions, etc.)[11] The pursuit of social advancement was aided by the publication of conduct books that associated cultivation and social superiority with cleanliness and self-control at the table. These books also described the necessary sensitivity to social rank in seating arrangements, table settings, and the proper distribution of food. Sumptuary laws provide evidence about social display and competition, as governments sought to place limits on the number of guests that could be invited to weddings and other feasts as well as the number of dishes that could be served at each.

In spite of these rich veins of historical evidence, food history has only fairly recently been a topic of interest to scholars. Food studies developed in the 1960s and 1970s, led by Annales historians who studied large-scale patterns and quantitative elements of the production and consumption of food, statistical studies of nutritional value, and the structures of agricultural systems.[12] In the 1980s, anthropologists and sociologists led the way toward evaluating the cultural elements of food and its connections to material culture, social identity, and symbolism and ritual.[13] More recently, historians have picked up on these approaches, studying food as a window onto cultural habits and expressions in particular regional and chronological contexts. For early modern Europe, these contributions are beginning to come together in a broad synthesis of themes relating

food to the rise of urban elites, changes in health and medical ideas, manners and conduct books, developments in taste and culinary style, banquets and status, and the interaction between public and private life.[14] While unquestionably valuable, these studies draw largely on research and sources from France, Germany, Italy, and England, with very few references to Spain. Spanish historians have not neglected food history, but so far their work has principally delved into narrow areas, groups, or time periods, such as food supplies and preparation in the royal palace of Madrid, food as represented in late medieval Castilian chronicles, and the rural culinary traditions of Almería.[15] There is a rich scholarly tradition in Spain of archive-based local history, often supported by local political and cultural foundations whose support guarantees publication but not necessarily a wide audience, especially for works published in Catalan or Gallego.[16] The few general works of synthesis of early modern Spanish cuisine have not been translated to English.[17] Therefore, what I hope to accomplish with this study is to provide an overview of food and social identity in early modern Spain for readers interested in food history, Spain, and early modern Europe. It draws on archival research in the sources described in the previous paragraphs, as well as incorporating valuable material from local studies that would not otherwise be accessible to an English-speaking audience.[18] This is not a history of food per se; instead I intend to demonstrate the performative elements of food in early modern Spain (particularly the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) and how these were intertwined with social and cultural change.

This analysis suggests that Spain generally fits into the overall patterns for western Europe, though it will highlight the elements that are unique to the peninsula. Spanish society at the beginning of the early modern period, like that of the rest of Europe, was firmly hierarchical and patriarchal. Its economy was mostly rural and agrarian; most peasants, while freer than they had been before the great plague of the fourteenth century, still owed dues and services to the lords whose land they worked. What made Spain distinct was its rich heritage of Jewish and Muslim culture and the legacy of the Reconquest. While the medieval period saw a fair degree of *convivencia*, or cultural tolerance and cooperation, between the

Muslims who conquered much of the peninsula in the eighth century and the Christians who slowly brought that territory back under their control over the following centuries, tensions between the two populations grew in the early modern period as Spain increasingly tried to define itself as Christian. The process of the Reconquest made its greatest headway from the eleventh through thirteenth centuries, creating a powerful land-based elite as well as close ties between political power and Christian religious identity. Politically it resulted in a sort of patchwork of kingdoms: the Crown of Castile (Galicia, Asturias, the Basque provinces, Leon, Old Castile, New Castile), the Crown of Aragon (Catalonia, Aragón, Valencia, Majorca), Navarre, and Granada. By the early 1700s, all of these had come together via conquest or marriage to form what we now refer to as Spain, though their regional identities remained strong and distinct. For the sake of simplicity, unless there is reason to do otherwise, my references to "Spain" are meant to include the various historical kingdoms that compose today's Spain.[19]

With the end of the Reconquest, the authority of the traditional landed nobility gradually lost ground in favor of that of a single centralized state, and these elites needed to adapt or find ways to defend their status and privilege. The clearly defined social structures of the medieval period became more fluid due to growth in trade and education, which provided opportunities for people of talent and ability to make a place for themselves rather than being limited to the position associated with the status of their family. New urban elites leveraged their wealth and connections to create a place for themselves, competing in prestige with the traditional nobles. Early modern Spaniards at all social levels emphasized their "old Christian" identity in opposition to Spanish Jews and Muslims as well as those who were relatively recent converts to Christianity. In all of these tensions and competitions, Spaniards used food to perform their identity and to negotiate their place within society. As Ken Albala has argued, "the social meaning of food grows in intensity when the class structure is in danger of disruption by social mobility."[20] Food could be both an agent of change and a method of defense, as members of any given social group sought to penetrate the barriers above them even as they reinforced the

barriers below. In contexts from funerals to festivals to their treatment of the poor, Spaniards used food as a mechanism to display and leverage their sophistication, social connections, religious affiliation, regional heritage, and membership in various groups and institutions.

We will begin with an overview of the basic characteristics of early modern Spanish food customs: what foods were eaten, how they were prepared, the perceived cultural hierarchy of food, and who controlled food in the urban environment. The chapters that follow will demonstrate the connections between food and various kinds of social identity and how these changed over the course of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. Early modern Spaniards had particular expectations of each other based on categories such as gender, political authority, and religion, and these categories had explicit connections to food customs. In the case of more mutable forms of identity for elective groups such as universities, monasteries, and confraternities, their members used food to distinguish themselves from the rest of society and to perform the particular purpose of the group, as well as to maintain hierarchy and order within the group. Such expressions of identity through food did not remain static. Individuals could use table manners, privileged access to food, and the treatment of guests to improve their own social status, limit that of others, or both. As the boundaries between traditional nobility and rising urban elites became increasingly blurred during this time, both groups used dining practices to jockey for social position.

The final section of this book addresses the symbolic value of food as it related to vice, virtue, and self-control. Early modern Spaniards were concerned about the broader trajectory of their empire, and food was closely interwoven into their discussions of morality, politics, and the economy. Gluttony was not just an individual sin but one that threatened the moral and economic health of the nation. Virtue (both individual and collective) could be pursued through the self-restraint of fasting as well as through charitable provisions to the poor. In both cases, attitudes toward food reflect Spaniards' concerns about their collective future and the proper relationship between the individual and society.